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PROGRAMME AND RELATED QUESTIONS IN THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND RELATED FIELDS

Modalities of reporting in the economic, social and related fields

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

In its resolution 48/162, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to the Economic and Social Council at its 1994 session on modalities of reporting in the economic, social and related fields. In pursuance of that request, the present report examines previous efforts and existing directives for the control and limitation of documentation and the reasons why those directives have not always been successfully implemented. It also discusses specific considerations in the resolution in regard to documentation, in particular the question of a system of integrated reports in the economic, social and related fields. Finally, it presents, for the consideration of the Council, a number of conclusions and recommendations for an improvement in the documentation situation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. As part of the continuing process of the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields, the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session adopted resolution 48/162. The resolution contains, in annex I, further measures for restructuring and revitalization, including a number of institutional reforms bearing on the complementarity between the work of the Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and their subsidiary bodies. Annex II contains guidelines on the division of labour between the Assembly and the Council, and lists those items which are to be considered by the Assembly and by the Council. The results of the implementation of those measures and guidelines will initially be seen at the current session of the Council and subsequently during the forty-ninth session of the Assembly.

2. Of particular concern in the resolution as it discusses the ongoing Secretariat reform process is the area of documentation. It is recognized in paragraphs 35 and 36 of annex I of the resolution that, to better serve the activities of Member States in the Second and Third Committees of the General Assembly, and in the Council and its subsidiary bodies, ways and means to enhance the modalities of reporting in the economic, social and related fields need to be further examined.

3. That concern is not new. For a number of years Member States and the Secretariat have been preoccupied with such questions as the timeliness of the issuance of documentation, the number of reports and the length of individual reports before the Council and the Assembly. Both the capacity of the Secretariat to produce the reports and the capacity of members to absorb the information contained therein once reports are issued would appear to be severely tested.

4. At its current session, the Council will have before it, as indicated in the report on the status of documentation for the session (E/1994/L.14), approximately 50 reports prepared by the Secretariat, 27 reports emanating from subsidiary organs and several procedural reports. Each of those reports has received a legislative mandate for its production in a resolution or decision of the Council or the Assembly.

II. EFFORTS OF THE COUNCIL AT CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION

5. Pursuant to Council decision 1989/105 of 5 May 1989, a task force was established to review the situation in regard to documentation before the Council. In its report (E/1990/93), the task force stressed the necessity of the implementation of its existing resolutions and decisions, in particular Council resolutions 1988/77 and 1989/114, as well as those of the Assembly, aimed at reducing the volume of documentation. Among those measures are (a) a 24-page limit for reports prepared by the Secretariat, (b) a 32-page limit for reports of subsidiary bodies of the Council, (c) preparation of an executive summary for each report that summarizes the actions recommended by the Council,

(d) ensuring that all Secretariat reports considered under a given item are consolidated into a single document, (e) drawing the attention of the Council or other intergovernmental body concerned, before decisions are adopted, to any request for documentation that the Secretariat would be unable to prepare and process on time and within approved resources, and (f) ensuring that documentation is available in accordance with the six-week rule. In its decision 1990/272 of 27 July 1990, the Council endorsed those recommendations.

6. The fact that the Council continues to face the same problems in regard to its documentation indicates the difficulty in the implementation of those recommendations, primarily in regard to length of documents and date of issuance.

7. The question of documentation cannot be discussed without also raising the issue of the number of meetings of subsidiary bodies of the Council and the Assembly and, indeed, the number of those bodies themselves. It is meetings that generate documentation. In paragraph 23 of the report of the Secretary-General on progress in the implementation of measures agreed upon for the revitalization of the Council, prepared in pursuance of Council resolution 1990/69 of 27 July 1990, the Secretary-General stated the following:

> Documentation is generated from two sources: one is the standing mandates of the subsidiary bodies that report to the Council; the other derives from requests for documentation contained in resolutions and decisions adopted by the Council under various agenda items. For documentation to be reduced, the Council has two options. It can reduce the number of its subsidiary bodies or it can exercise restraint in its request for documentation under particular agenda items. The Council can also exercise both options.

8. One could also argue that a reduction in the length of meetings of subsidiary bodies would bring about a reduction in the number of documents. However, experience has shown that documentation needs of the various subsidiary bodies of the Council tend to be relatively static from session to session. What increases documentation pressure, not to mention pressure on meetings services in general, is additional sessions to those already programmed: for example, an extraordinary session of a functional commission that is, by legislative authority, only to meet on a biennial basis. It has proved exceedingly difficult to curb the growing tendency of subsidiary bodies to meet on an annual basis, despite an existing legislative mandate for biennial sessions.

9. After the adoption by the Council at its substantive session of 1993 of the provisional calendar of conferences and meetings for 1994 and 1995 in the economic, social and related fields, the President informed the Council that it had authorized 44 sessions of its subsidiary bodies for 1994 and 43 sessions for 1995; three of the subsidiary bodies, which were authorized to meet biennially in odd-numbered years, were scheduled to hold special sessions in 1994. An approximate total of 100 weeks of meetings (almost two years of working days) had been scheduled for that calendar year. A conservative estimate of 29,000 manuscript pages of documentation was given for those meetings in 1994, which did not include some 2,000 pages of documentation for the Council itself. The

link between numbers of meetings and volume of documentation was made more than evident.

10. In October 1993, concerned with the growing volume of documentation, the Secretary-General established an interdepartmental task force to review all documentation on political matters. A similar task force was set up to deal with documentation in the economic and social sectors. The considerations and conclusions of that task force are incorporated into the present report.

III. CONSIDERATIONS IN ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 48/162 IN REGARD TO DOCUMENTATION QUESTIONS

A. A system of integrated reports

11. Annexes I and II of Assembly resolution 48/162 address the problem of documentation in several instances. In paragraph 36 of annex I, the Secretary-General is requested to make recommendations on the advantages of establishing a system of integrated reports in the economic, social and related fields. Such a system would posit a series of global reports prepared by the Secretariat in, for example, the fields of macroeconomic policy coordination, social development, and environment and development in a similar fashion to the annual World Economic and Social Survey (formerly the World Economic Survey), which is currently before the Council (E/1994/65).

12. A number of broad surveys in the economic and social sectors are already prepared by the United Nations on a regular basis. In addition to the World Economic and Social Survey, they include the Trade and Development Report and the World Investment Report, both prepared annually by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Human Development Report prepared annually by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), The State of the World Population Report prepared annually by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the State of the World's Children prepared annually by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), The State of the Environment prepared annually by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Report on the World Social Situation prepared on a quadrennial basis by the United Nations Secretariat, and the economic surveys prepared annually by the five regional commissions and submitted to the Council (see E/1994/51, 52, 53, 54 and 55).

13. One advantage of such reports is that they consolidate information and recommendations in a broad field in a coordinated manner, thereby allowing for greater articulation of development perspectives and the formulation of policy options.

14. The question of extending that series of reports to include a "policy report" to be prepared by the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development of the Secretariat has been under discussion at the senior level of the Secretariat. It would be a synthesis of key policy issues and would draw upon, but not duplicate, other reports in the economic and social sectors that are submitted to the Council and/or the General Assembly. In view of the fact that the information contained in the World Economic and Social Survey, which is

prepared for the Council at its summer substantive session, would be among the necessary inputs to the policy report under discussion, that report would need to be presented to the General Assembly.

15. As to the more general question of integrated reporting to the Council rather than the more specific sectoral reports that are in general mandated, this is an approach which the Secretariat would warmly encourage. However, this would either require a further consolidation of intergovernmental bodies operating in the economic and social fields (since most reporting is in response to intergovernmental requests) or granting a mandate to the Secretariat to identify areas in which joint or common reporting to intergovernmental bodies could be undertaken.

B. Streamlining of documentation requirements

16. The pertinent passages in annex II to resolution 48/162 generally reiterate that which has previously been stated in regard to the need to streamline documentation for the Assembly and the Council, to issue documents according to the six-week rule and to reduce the total number of documents for each year. In other words, the Assembly requested that existing measures for control and limitation of documents be respected.

17. Such was also one of the conclusions of the Council's 1990 task force on documentation (see para. 5 above) and of the recently established interdepartmental task force. Enforcement of those measures has, however, proved difficult, in particular in regard to the time of submission and eventual issuance of reports in all official languages. Despite the good will and the best efforts of the Secretariat, the number and the timing of meetings of intergovernmental bodies and their documentation requirements have had the effect of compressing the time available for the preparation of documents throughout the entire process - from research and drafting by author departments, to clearance and editing, through translation and reproduction.

18. The conclusion of the Secretary-General in paragraph 23 of his earlier report (E/1992/86) that, without measures to reduce the number of meetings of intergovernmental bodies or of requests for documentation or of agenda items before the Council, "it is unlikely that the quality and timeliness of the documentation submitted to the Council can be improved", is no less valid in 1994 than it was in 1992 and no less valid for any other intergovernmental body in the economic, social and related fields than for the Council.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

19. Previous recommendations of the Council on control and limitation of documentation appear to have had limited effect. A number of reports prepared by the Secretariat exceed the 24-page limit; reports of subsidiary bodies are rarely kept within the 32-page limit; many documents are not submitted in time to be issued according to the six-week rule; the number of documents before intergovernmental bodies shows no sign of decreasing.

20. Rather than repeating its previous recommendations, the Council may wish to consider the following measures in regard to control and limitation of documentation:

(a) Establishing a 16-page limit for reports prepared by the Secretariat for the Economic and Social Council or one of its subsidiary bodies. The production of addenda to such reports would be strictly limited to that which is included in the legislative mandate. The 24-page limit would continue to apply to consolidated reports that cover more than a single legislative mandate (see para. (e) below);

(b) Limiting the reports of the functional commissions and the subsidiary bodies of the Council to (a) a brief discussion on organizational and procedural matters and (b) recommendations, including resolutions and decisions adopted. The current practice of including an extensive summary of the discussion during the session should be discontinued;

(c) Requesting the Secretariat, at the time of the adoption of a legislative mandate requesting documentation, to indicate whether the documentation could be prepared within existing staff and financial resources and, if not, to give the costs involved;

(d) Mandating the presentation of oral rather than written reports, particularly in regard to progress reports and reports that are presented on an annual basis;

(e) Encouraging the submission of a single "consolidated" report on related topics under a single item or sub-item of the agenda;

(f) Requesting the Secretariat to compile for the Council and for each of its subsidiary bodies a list of documents mandated in resolutions and decisions to be adopted at a given session in order to give members a clear picture of all documentation requested and to include in the report on the status of documentation for a given session a list of all reports already mandated for the coming year;

(g) Making increased efforts at biennialization or triennialization of agenda items or subitems. The Council and its subsidiary bodies should consider if, in fact, the majority of agenda items need to be examined on an annual basis.

21. As the Council redefines its role as the principal coordinating body of the United Nations system in the economic, social and related fields, it needs to consider the role of documentation in that process. The purpose of the Secretariat in the documentation field is to provide Member States with the information they have requested in legislative mandates, while at the same time respecting directives on control and limitation of documentation and ensuring timely issuance of documentation. Member States can assist the Secretariat in that process by requesting only that documentation which fills a particular, stated purpose and by making efforts to limit the number of meetings that both require and generate documentation.

22. An improvement in the documentation situation will require the joint efforts of the members of intergovernmental bodies in the economic, social and related areas, in particular the Council, and the Secretariat. The Secretary-General wishes to assure members of the Council that the Secretariat will exercise its best efforts, in pursuance of the directives of Member States, to work towards that goal.